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Brooding Silence Fills the Slighted Room

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Pride and Prejudice: The Student Blog

Tuesday, February 26, 2013

Brooding Silence Fills the Slighted Room

Richard Owen Cambridge's poem, "[An Elegy Written in an Empty Assembly Room](#)" (1770) foregrounds the tortures that Austen only hints threaten the Bennet sisters at the Meryton ball in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Cambridge's poem is a self-described parody of Eloisa and Abelard, the medieval story of a love affair gone tragically wrong made famously au courant by Alexander Pope in 1717. Yet the poem's depiction of the teeth-gnashing anxiety the protagonist experiences as she imagines the ball she can't attend is anything but satirical. Cambridge describes how the protagonist hasn't gotten a card inviting her to the ball; as she realizes she can't attend, she imagines herself standing in an empty ballroom, elegizing the death of both her social reputation and her hopeful, burgeoning love affair with a colonel. She tries to maintain her composure, but the poem consistently narrates the despondency she experiences as she imagines the ball and her absence from it. Like the "awkward guests" she knows will soon "[crowd]" the ballroom and in "measure[d] beat[s]" make the "floors" "groan," her mental state is one of profound distress (304). Although her "artful pride conceals the bursting tear," she "swell[s] with rage" and "sicken[s]" and "grow[s] desp'rate" (304). Finally, she "curse[s] the ball" and resigns herself to "clos[ing] [her] blubber'd eyes" to dream of a courtship she'll never experience (304-5). She closes the poem by confessing that not even reading "modern novels" will provide her any relief from her torment (305).

But now grown desp'rate, and beyond all hope,
I curse the ball, the d—s, and the pope.
And as the loads of borrow'd plate go by,
Tax it! ye greedy ministers, I cry.
How shall I feel, when Sol resigns his light
To this proud splendid goddess of the night!
Then when her awkward guests in measure beat
The crowded floors, which groan beneath their feet!
What thoughts in solitude shall then possess
My tortur'd mind, or soften my distress!
Not all that envious malice can suggest
Will soothe the tumults of my raging breast.

Although *Pride and Prejudice*'s famous first line, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife," sets the novel up as a miniature portrait in which the vicissitudes of everyday domestic life in a small neighborhood are painted with a fine brush against the backdrop of the larger economic and cultural forces at work in the Regency, the novel whisks its reader out of the Bennet's parlour and into the assembly room at Meryton by the second chapter. There, Elizabeth is snubbed by Darcy, and her "first impression" of him problematically established. Yet where Austen invites her readers to imagine that Elizabeth's good humor, especially her taste for the ridiculous, equips her to cope seamlessly with Darcy's refusal to dance with her, the poem by Cambridge suggests otherwise. Although obvious differences exist between the two texts (Lizzy at least gets to attend the ball), Cambridge reminds us that balls were very serious business for women in the Regency. When read in light of the kinds of intense anxieties balls engendered in women like the protagonist of "[An Elegy Written in an Empty Assembly Room](#)," Lizzy's good humor here at the fateful first impression emerges as a defense mechanism at best and as a macabre commentary on the perilous state of women in Regency culture at worst. Consequently, the novel's humorous overtones merit careful scrutiny; they threaten to be but the thinnest of veneers that paint over high stakes. In other words, the novel's funniest moments might point us to its most fraught moments of profound cognitive dissonance.

Posted by [Crystal B. Lake](#) at 7:11 PM [No comments:](#)

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About

A blog site featuring original research by undergraduate students at Wright State University enrolled in Crystal B. Lake's *Pride and Prejudice* (Spring 2013).

We hope you enjoy reading about the novel and historical contexts surrounding it. And be sure to participate in CELIA's Bicentennial events on October 2013. Click [here](#) for more information.

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